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An Inscribed Avalokiteśvara from the Hemis Monastery, Ladakh

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At the end of 2012 my attention was drawn to the inscription edited here almost simultaneously by Dr. Christian Luczanits, at that time curator at the Rubin Museum in New York, and by Dr. Amy Heller, Nyon (Switzerland).¹ The inscription is written on the pedestal of an Avalokiteśvara image, which is itself approximately 45 cm high or almost 90 cm including the halo (figure 1). An image of this bronze is published without any reading of the inscription in the catalogue of the Museum of the Hemis Monastery, which is situated about 45 km south to Leh in Ladakh.²

Script and image do not contradict dating the bronze to approximately 11th century Kashmir as suggested by Ch. Luczanits, although the type of “proto-śāradā” script used did not change much over a longer period, which forbids using palaeography for more than a very rough dating.³

The reading of the inscription of three lines does not pose any difficulty (figure 2). Only the interpretation of the end is not entirely certain:

/1/ # ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetum teṣāṁ tathāgato hy avadaṭ teṣāṁ ca yo nirodha evaṁvā-
 /2/ dī mahāśravaṇa •• deyadharmo yan karāpitam idaṁ śākyabhikṣu pun(!)yajayasya
 /3/ yad atra puṇyam tad bhavatu śrī vasantarājasya tathā s(ārdha)satvāṇāṁ buddhāyas
 samtu-r-iti

“Of the things (*dharma*) that arise from a cause, the Tathāgata explained their cause and their cessation. This is the teaching of the great ascetic. This is the pious gift (and) this was ordered to be made by the Śākyabhikṣu Punyajaya. Whatever merit (was made) here that should go to Śrī Vasantarāja together (with) all beings. May (they) become Buddhas.”

¹ It is my great pleasure to thank both scholars for information provided on and for photos of this bronze, and I am, first of all, obliged to the authorities of the Hemis Monastery for readily granting the permission to publish image and inscription.

² *Catalogue Hemis Museum*. Photography by Ravinder Kalra, ed. by Khanchen Tsewang Rigzin. Leh-Ladakh: Hemis Museum, no date.

³ Date and place mentioned in the catalogue, see preceding note, “Gandhāra 3rd–4th century” is not tenable.

The first part of the inscription is the famous (originally Middle Indic *āryā-*) verse given as an answer by the monk Assaji (Aśvajit) to Sāriputta (Śāriputra) when the latter enquired about the essential teaching of the Buddha.

Although this verse is quoted frequently, almost everywhere in the Indian Buddhist world when merit is made,⁴ hardly any research has been done so far on the different recensions of the text, geographical distribution or possible school affiliation. A first attempt at a comprehensive classification was made by Peter Skilling in the felicitation volume presented to the Thai epigraphist Prasert na Nakorn in 1999, which is not easily accessible everywhere.⁵ Therefore, P. Skilling's classification is repeated here in an abbreviated form, but enlarged by the north-western group (2.3.4), which is characterized by the use of *mahāśravāṇa* together with either *hy avadat* or *prāha*. The numbering follows the one suggested by P. Skilling.

1. Canonical / literary versions:

1.1 Original verse in the Theravāda-Vinaya

*ye dhammā hetupabbhavā tesam hetum tathāgato āha
tesañ ca yo nirodho evaṇvādī mahāsamaṇo, Vin I 40,28* foll. (Sp 975,19-30)*

āryā with *ślokapada* in the first quarter, or, alternatively, *āryā*, if *dhammā* and *hetu-pabbhavā* is read.⁶

1.2 Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādin

*ye dharmā hetuprabhāvā hetun teṣām tathāgato āha
tesām ca yo nirodha evaṇvādī mahāśramaṇah, Mvu III 62,8* foll. (ed. É. Senart 1897)*

The meter is faulty because of *nirodhā*; variant: ms. M (Nepalese paper ms., no date): *mahaśraṇaḥ* (cf. 2.3.4.1 north-western group)

Manuscripts not used by É. Senart in his edition of the *Mahāvastu*:

a) palm-leaf ms. Sa folio 288b2⁷ (end):

⁴. Peter Skilling, ““Buddhist Sealings”: Reflections on Terminology, Motivation, Donor’s Status, School-Affiliation, and Print-Technology,” in: *South Asian Archaeology 2001*. edited by Catherine Jarrige and Vincent Lefèvre. Vol. II. Historical Archaeology and Art History. Paris 2005, pp. 677–685, particularly p. 685.

⁵. Peter Skilling, “A Buddhist inscription from Go Xoai, southern Vietnam and notes towards a classification of *ye dharmā* inscriptions,” in: *80 pī sāstrācāry dr. Prahserith na Nagarā. Rvam pad gvām vijākār tān² cāriūk leh ekasāra porāṇa* (80 years Prof. Dr. Prasert na Nakorn: A collection of research articles on epigraphy and ancient documents). Bangkok 2542 (1999), pp. 171–187. Older publications are collected and general questions discussed also by Ingo Strauch, “Zwei Stempel aus Swat (Pakistan),” *BIST* 13/14. 2000, pp. 215–230. — The article by Kyaw Minn Htin, “Early Buddhism in Myanmar: *Ye Dhammā* Inscriptions from Arakan,” in: Pierre-Yves Manguin *et alii* (edd.): *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*. Singapore & Delhi 2011, pp. 385–406 is inaccessible to me.

⁶. Metrics and development of the verse are discussed in Ludwig Alsdorf: *Die Āryā-Strophen des Pāli-Kanons metrisch hergestellt und textgeschichtlich untersucht*. Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz, Geistes- und sozialwissenschaftliche Klasse. Jahrgang 1967, No. 4 [rev.: L. Schwarzschild, *JAO* 90. 1970, p. 586; J. W. de Jong, *IIJ* 13. 1971, pp. 210 foll.; H. Kopp, *OLZ* 68. 1973, col. 380 foll.; *ABORI* 53. 1972, p. 269], pp. 66 foll.

⁷. A. Yuyama: *The Mahāvastu-Avadāna in Old Palm-Leaf and Paper Manuscripts*. I. Palm-Leaf Manuscripts, II. Paper Manuscripts. *Bibliotheca Codicum Asiaticorum* 15, 16. Tokyo 2001.

ye dharmā hetuprabhāvā hetun teṣāṁ tathāgato āha |
 tesāñ ca yo nirodha evaṇvādī mahāśramaṇah ||

b) paper ms. Sb⁷ = Senart; variant *hetu teṣām*

The only easily accessible palm-leaf ms. thus shows that ^o-*prabhāvā* is a later Nepalese innovation.

1.3 *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra*

ye dharmā hetuprabhavās teṣāṁ hetum tathāgata āha
 tesāñ ca yo nirodha evaṇvādī mahāśramaṇah, CPS § 28b10; 28c8

The meter is destroyed by the Sanskrit *sandhi*: *tathāgata*, *nirodha*, cf. also 2.3.3 *uvāca* group.

1.4 *Praṭītyasamutpāda-nāma-mahāyānasūtra* (Sanskrit in Tibetan script, Tibetan Tripitaka):

ye dharmmā hetuprabhavā hetun teṣān tathāgato hy avadat
 tesāñ ca yo nirodha evaṇvādī mahāśramaṇah

The meter is saved in *hy avadat* (cf. 2.3.1), but destroyed by *nirodha*. The same source is probably quoted by E. Waldschmidt, *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra* III. 1962 § 28c8, p. 384 note 1.

This version of the formula also occurs in the *Karmavibhaṅgopadeśa*, cf. ARIRIAB XVII, p. 103 with note 154 (reference provided by N. Kudo).

2. Epigraphical versions:

2.1 Pāli inscriptions

2.1.1 *tesam* group

ye dhammā hetuppabhavā tesam hetum tathāgato āha
 tesāñ ca yo nirodho evaṇvādī mahāsamaṇo ti

Siam (5 references), Burma (1 reference)⁸

2.1.2 *yesam* group

ye dhammā hetuppabhavā yesam hetum tathāgato āha
 tesāñ ca yo nirodho evaṇvādī mahāsamaṇo ti

Siam (10 references)⁹

2.2 Hybrid Pāli inscriptions

2.2.1 *avaca* group

ye dhammā hetuprabhavā tesām hetum tathāgato avaca

⁸. If not indicated otherwise, the number of references is that given by P. Skilling, *Prasert Volume* 1999, as note 5.

⁹. Three additional references of this group are published by Peter Skilling, "Traces of the Dharma. Preliminary reports on some *ye dhammā* and *ye dharmā* inscriptions from Mainland South-East Asia," *BEFEO* 90/91. 2003–2004, pp. 273–287; cf. also § 2.2.2.1 (P. Skilling, *Prasert Volume* 1999) for an additional *yeṣām*-inscription.

tesām ca yo nirodho evaṇvādī mahāśāmaṇo

Bihar and Bengal (7 references), Vietnam (1 reference), Cambodia (1 reference), SE-Asia (1 reference, provenance unclear, *BEFEO* 90/91. 2003–2004, p. 284)

ye dhammā hetuprabhavā tesām hetum tathāgato avoca

tesām ca yo nirodho evaṇvādī mahāśramāṇo

This inscription from Sarnath (published by S. Konow, *EI* 9. 1907–1908, p. 293) is according to paleography among the oldest epigraphical evidence for this formula (3rd / 4th century?). The use of the unmetrical *avoca* instead of *avaca* is, if read correctly, so far singular.

ye dhammā hetuprabhavā tesām hetum tathāgato

avaca tesāñ ca yo nirodho evaṇvādī mahāśāmaṇo

This division of lines results in two *ślokapadas* (a+b) and two unmetrical lines (c+d).

Siam (1 reference); Vietnam (1 reference)

2.3. Sanskrit inscriptions

2.3.1 *hy avadat* group

ye dharmmā hetuprabhavā hetum teṣām tathāgato hy avadat

tesāñ ca yo nirodha evaṇvādī mahāśramāṇah

Pāla artefacts in Siam (6 references); Burma (1 reference);¹⁰ Malaysia (1 reference); Vietnam (2 references);¹¹ Afghanistan (1 reference, cf. 2.3.4.1 north-western group); cf. 1.4 *Pratītyasamutpāda-nāma-mahāyānasūtra*

2.3.2 *avadat* group

ye dharmmā hetuprabhavāḥ hetun teṣām tathāgato avadat

tesāñ ca yo nirodha evaṇvādī mahāśramāṇah

Java (1 reference)

2.3.3 *uvāca* group

ye dharmmā hetuprabhavā hetun teṣān tathāgata uvāca

tesāñ ca yo nirodhaḥ evaṇvādī mahāśramāṇah

Java (1 reference). The reading *teṣām hetum tathāgato hy uvāca*, *Catuspariṣatsūtra* (ed. E. Waldschmidt, I. 1952, p. 23 ms. S 360, folio 111, line 1 = III. 1962 § 28c8, p. 384 note 1) is doubtful, cf. above 1.3.

2.3.4 North-western group:

2.3.4.1 *mahāśravaṇa* + *hy avadat* sub-group

¹⁰. The evidence from Burma is found in John Guy, “Offering up a rare jewel: Buddhist merit-making and votive tablets in early Burma,” in: A. Green & T. R. Blurton: *Burma. Art and Archaeology*. London 2002, pp. 23–33, Figure 3.4 from the Archaeological Department, Burma: [ye dhar]mā hetuprabhavā hetum /2/ [teṣām tathāgato hy avadat-te(sām) ca yo /3/ [niro]dho evaṇvādī mahāśra(maṇa)ḥ. No reading of the inscriptions is given, which are, unfortunately, with one exception illegible from the images (figures 3.1, 3.8, 3.9, 3.11).

¹¹. The inscriptions from Siam (Museum Songkhla) and Vietnam are edited by P. Skilling, *BEFEO* 90/91. 2003–2004, as note 9 above, pp. 282 and pp. 285, 287 respectively.

ye dharmmā hetuprabhavā hetun teṣāṁ tathāgato hy avadat
 tesāṁ ca yo nirodha evaṁvādī mahāśravaṇaḥ

Afghanistan (1 reference [type B] in M. Taddei, “Inscribed Clay Tablets and Miniature Stūpas from Ghazni,” *EW NS* 20. 1970, pp. 70–86 and 1 reference in L. Sander, “An Unusual *ye dharmā* Formula,” in: Jens Braarvig (ed.) *Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection III. Buddhist Manuscripts II.* Oslo 2002 [rev.: D. Seyfort Ruegg, *BSOAS* 70. 2007, pp. 622–624], pp. 337–349); Gilgit (1 reference in D. Klimburg-Salter, “The Painted Covers of the Samghāṭasūtra 627/8 and the Votive Objects from Gilgit,” *South Asian Archaeology* 1989, ed. by Catherine Jarrige. Monographs in World Archaeology No. 14. Madison 1992, pp. 395–402, particularly p. 399 Figure 47.5, and 2 references on figures 3a & b¹²); Mvu variant in ms. M., see above 1.2. The inscription from the Hemis Museum also belongs to this group.

2.3.4.2 *mahāśravaṇa + prāha* sub-group

ye dharmmā hetuprabhavā hetun teṣāṁ tathāgata prāha
 tesāṁ ca yo nirodha evaṁvādī mahāśravaṇaḥ

Altogether 6 references: Strauch, “Zwei Stempel aus Swat (Pakistan),” as note 5 above, and two sealings (figures 4a & b), one photographed by Chandrabal Tripathi (1929–1996) in SPS Museum in Srinagar (figure 4a), the other, of unknown provenance, by Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, München, in about 2000¹³ (figure 4b). The type G in M. Taddei, “Inscribed Clay Tablets and Miniature Stūpas,” above 2.3.4.1, belongs here. M. Taddei’s reading *hy avadat* instead of the clearly visible *prāha* (figures 24, 25 in Taddei, group G) is a mistake. The figures do not allow controlling most of M. Taddei’s readings of the barely legible sealings. However, in figure 18 [type D] the sealing ends with *evaṁvādī*; *mahāśrava*[or: *ma*]ṇa is missing).

(e) ye tharmā hetuprabhavā hetu hetus teṣyāṁs tathāgatā(ya)
 teṣyāṁ ca yo nīrotha(m) evaṁvādī mahāśravaṇā ||
 deyatharmo yaṁ mahāśrātho upāsaka (cha)i(da)asvālapati[sya] sumanaśūrasya

L. Sander, “A Graffito with the Quintessence of Buddhist Doctrine from Ladakh,” in: *Festschrift Klaus Bruhn zur Vollendung des 65. Lebensjahres*. Reinbek 1994, pp. 561–570.

At the end of pada b *tathāgatāya* is clearly a mistake, most likely for *prāha*. The form *tharma* instead of *dharma* is also found in the “Unusual *ye dharmā* formula” (cf. 2.3.4.1), in *deyatharmo* in the inscription on the bronze of Jayamaṅgalavikramādityanandi, year 82, and in the name *tharmilāḥ*, Thor-Nord 132:8 for Dharmila.¹⁴ Reading and interpretation of the sequence *(cha)i(da)asvālapati* are, except for ^o-*pati*, uncertain. Perhaps the Iranian title *spālapati* is hidden in this sequence. If so, *(cha)i(da)a* may be compared perhaps to *sāītā-*

¹². Both impressions were photographed in 1982 or 1983 in Northern Pakistan and kindly handed over to me for publication by V. Thewald, Heidelberg.

¹³. Both scholars kindly agreed to the publication of their photos.

¹⁴. O. v. Hinüber: *Die Palola Śāhis. Ihre Steininschriften, Inschriften auf Bronzen, Handschriftenkolophone und Schutzauber*. Antiquities of Northern Pakistan 5. Mainz 2004, no. 12, p. 31, line 2; D. Bandini-König: *Die Felsbildstation Thalpan VI*. Kataloge Ba Das, Ba Das Ost, Gali, Gukona, Mostar Nala, Ke Ges, Ame Ges und Drang Das [Appendix: Katalog der Inschriften von Thor-Nord]. Materialien zur Archäologie der Nordgebiete Pakistans Band 11. Mainz 2013 [2014], p. 253.

puruṣe or *chchāti-puruṣe*.¹⁵ Following the structure of the inscription, *(cha)i(da)asvālapati* should be the title of Sumanaśūra.¹⁶

/1/ ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetu hetus teṣāṁ tathāgata prāha tesāṁ ca yo nirodha evaṁvādī mahāśravaṇa /2/ ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetu hetus teṣāṁ tathāgata prāha tesāṁ [ca] yo (nirodha e)vaṁvādī mahāś(ravaṇa) /3/ ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetu hetus teṣāṁ tathāgata prāha tesāṁ ca yo nirodha evaṁvādī mahā[śravaṇa] /4/ ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetu hetus teṣāṁ ta)thāgata prāha tesāṁ ca yo nirodha evaṁvādī m[ahāśravaṇa] /5/ ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetu hetu[

This single birch-bark folio, which was most likely found during the excavations at Naupur by Kaul Shastri in 1938, was photographed by D. Klimburg-Salter in the Pratap Singh Museum at Srinagar in summer 1989 (figure 5). The text breaks off in the middle of line 5.

— — —

With the use of *hy avadat* and particularly *mahāśravaṇa*¹⁷ the Hemis inscription edited here fits into group 2.3.4.1. The use of a *virāma* at the end of *avadat* is as remarkable as are the two dots side by side at the end of the word *mahāśravaṇa* ••. They seem to mark at the same time a *visarga* and the end of the verse or sentence.

The inscription is so far the second example for a combination of the *ye-dharma*-formula with *deyadharma* (cf. 2.3.4.2).

The blending of two formulas used to introduce a donation (*deyadharma* *yaṁ karāpitam idam*) is unusual, but not really unique. For, similar combinations like *deyadharma* *yaṁ susudāya krtam* on a bronze do occur occasionally¹⁸ with the wording on a bronze donated by Maṅgalahāṃsikā being particularly close to the Hemis inscription: *devadharma* *yaṁ śrī paramadeviyā maṅgalahāṃsikayā ayam devadhammam kārāpitam*.¹⁹

The title of donor Puṇyajaya adds to the Śākyabhikṣus²⁰ occurring in these north-western inscriptions: Acintamittra (ARIRIAB X. 2007, p. 40), Ratnacittin (Fussman, p. 30²¹),

¹⁵. *Palola Śāhis*, as preceding note, p. 141 (on *spālapati*), 82 foll., 146 foll.

¹⁶. There are also some titles in inscriptions and colophons from Gilgit which resist interpretation, cf. *Palola Śāhis*, as note 14, p. 140.

¹⁷. On the north-western form °śravaṇa instead of °śramaṇa see O. v. Hinüber: *Das ältere Mittelindisch im Überblick*. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Klasse. Sitzungsberichte, 467. Band. Vienna 2001, § 210.

¹⁸. Relevant material is collected in *Palola Śāhis*, as note 14 above, p. 181; cf. now also *devadharma ya[m] giriyo (+ krtam) //*, Thor-Nord 29:1, MANP 11, as note 14 above, p. 240, which, however, are probably two separate inscriptions.

¹⁹. O. v. Hinüber, “Four Donations Made by Maṅgalahāṃsikā, Queen of Palola (Gilgit),” ARIRIAB XIV. 2011, pp. 3–6, particularly p. 6.

²⁰. The concept of Śākyabhikṣu is discussed by R. Cohen, “Kinsmen of the Son: Śākyabhikṣu and the Institution of the Bodhisatva Ideal,” *History of Religions* 40.1. 2000, pp. 1–31.

²¹. G. Fussman, “Chilas, Hatun et les bronzes bouddhiques du Cachemire,” in: *Antiquities of Northern Pakistan. Reports and Studies* Vol. 2, ed. by Karl Jettmar. Mainz 1993, pp. 1–60.

Ratnaprabha (*ARIRIAB* XII. 2009, p. 3), Vimalībhānu (? *ARIRIAB* XII. 2009, p. 4), Vīkavarman (?);²² and Hariṣayaśa (*Palola Śāhis*, p. 168 with note 225). His personal name Punyajaya is written with a dental *-n-* instead of the correct *Puṇyajaya*.²³ The merit made is shared with a second person called Vasantarāja.²⁴

The end of the inscription poses some intricate problems. The readings *s(ā)rdha* and *buddhāyas* are not beyond doubt. The vowel long *-ā* is not always marked very clearly; still the slightly lengthened vertical stroke seems to support a reading *sā* rather than *sa*. If so, the next ligature should be a perhaps slightly miswritten *rdha* rather than *rva*, which presupposes *sā*, because of the roundish form of the subscript. Comparing the usual formulas it seems that the word *sarva* is missing. Whether or not the uncalled for retroflex *-ṇa-* in *satvāṇām* is really conditioned by *sarva* as the (perhaps missing) first member of the compound is more than doubtful, once *punya* for *punya* in the name of the donor is compared. However, the intended message of the faulty wording is clearly “together with (all) beings.”

It is difficult to decide, whether the initial *akṣara* in *buddhāyas* is to be read as *bu-* or as *vu-* because of the only slightly flattened head of the character. Read either way, the intended word remains *buddha*. An interpretation of *buddhāyas* as one of the extremely rare nom. pl. forms ending in *-āyah* traced by Franklin Edgerton in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit²⁵ is supported by the following plural *santu*. The *sandhi*-consonant *-r-* is probably abstracted from a form like *syur-iti*, which is almost a synonym.²⁶ It is not unusual to find *iti* at the end of an inscription.²⁷

There does not seem to be any immediate parallel to the wish that all beings should reach Buddhahood in inscriptions from the north-west.

²². The reading of the name is uncertain, also possible is perhaps *vīkra-*^o or even *dhīkra-*^o: Lobsang Nyima Laurent, “lHa bla ma Zhi ba ’od’s Eighth Century Bronze from Gilgit,” *Revue d’Études Tibétaines* 26. 2013, pp. 195–214, particularly p. 202.

²³. Names containing the element *punya* were popular not only in Central Asia: O. v. Hinüber, “Indische Namen in Zentralasien bis 1000 n. Chr. 1995,” *Kleine Schriften*. Wiesbaden 2009, pp. 659–665, particularly pp. 659, 663 and below p. 221 “Three *Saddharmaṇḍarīkasūtra* manuscripts” note 23, but also in India: Alfons Hilka: *Beiträge zur Kenntnis der indischen Namengebung. Die altindischen Personennamen*. Indische Forschungen 3. Heft. Breslau 1911, p. 133.

²⁴. Names containing the element *vasanta* are listed in Hilka: *Beiträge*, as preceding note, p. 115.

²⁵. *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*. Volume I: Grammar. New Haven 1953 § 8.82.

²⁶. Examples for the *sandhi*-consonant *-r-*: *Mittelindisch*, as note 17 above, § 271.

²⁷. Cf. *Palola Śāhis*, as note 14 above, no. 22 (Hatūn inscription), no. 23 (Danyor inscription); *ARIRIAB* XIV. 2011, p. 11, note 12 (Rudrapuruṣadatta inscription); *ARIRIAB* XII. 2014. Supplement (Kanaganahalli Inscriptions), p. 21, inscription E (Vāsiṣṭhīputra Śrī Pulumāvi inscription), etc.

Fig. 1: Avalokiteśvara from the Hemis Museum



Fig. 2: Hemis Inscription



PLATE 2

Fig. 3a:



Fig. 3b:



Fig. 4a:



Fig. 4b:



Fig. 5:

